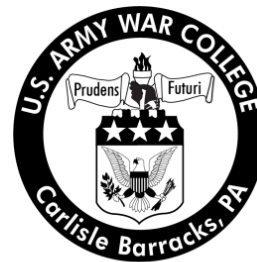


# Strategy Research Project International Fellow

## Gangs in Honduras: A Threat to National Security

by

Lieutenant Colonel Marco V. Barahona Fuentes  
Honduras Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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**GANGS IN HONDURAS: A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Gangs in Honduras pose a real threat to national security. These criminal groups continue to develop networking and capabilities that turn them into a sort of new insurgency. Many of these gangs are growing and imposing an ideology of violence, which is contrary to democratic values and which violates human rights. In addition, this paper describes how third generation gangs are working in tandem with the Transnational Crime Organization developing a strong connections, which threaten sovereignty, stability, public security, governability and, consequently, imperil democratic legitimacy. They represent a challenge to the Honduran state that seems to have lost the ability to provide basic rights to its citizens, to control its territory and to enforce law and authority. Prevention of these gangs will require a different comprehensive approach. Gang activity must be countered through governmental commitment and cooperation, actively engagement of the private sector, participation of the local communities and the pledge of international support.





## GANGS IN HONDURAS: A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

“In the future, war will not be waged by armies but by groups whom today we call terrorist, guerrillas, bandits and robbers, but who will undoubtedly hit upon more formal titles to describe themselves.”

— Martin van Creveld<sup>1</sup>

Security has become the main concern of the international community. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994 included the concept of human security as a key factor and, within it, the safety of the people a crucial component of this idea.<sup>2</sup> The world and particularly the Honduran society at large face many challenges known today as “new threats.” These include acts committed by violent extremist groups, organized crime, and in the case of Honduras, street gangs or “pandillas.” The majority of actions of these groups are characterized by being covert, taking place in undefined fronts and by causing serious harm to innocent civilians. It is a clear challenge to the security system as a whole, the importance of the well being of the people is considered within the human security context.

This new challenge [posed by gangs] has evolved in many different ways, including the development of strong linkages to drug trafficking, smuggling, arms trafficking, and transnational crime; consequently, imperil democratic legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> These street gangs in Honduras have become an emergent threat increasing in power, financially based sophistication and increased brutality, whose business practices are learned nearly exclusively from international groups. “Gangs have dramatically expanded their operations since the 1990’s, and are effectively waging a form of irregular warfare against government institutions.”<sup>4</sup>

This paper will discuss how such violent groups have evolved within an ideology of violence, their ability to develop networking and the capabilities that allow them to

become a non-state actor working in tandem with other violent non-state actors. It will also discuss how these groups influence Honduras' instability and pose both direct and implicit threats to Honduran citizens' well-being, a posture that threatens sovereignty, democratic stability and security. Consequently, preventing them will require the cooperation of governmental authorities, the private sector and international support.

By 2006 there were 100,000 gang members in Central America with 36,000 gang members in Honduras,<sup>5</sup> and the numbers continue to grow. John P. Sullivan describes them as generation gangs which "reside at the intersection between crime and war."<sup>6</sup> According to Sullivan, they are the "result of the significant changes in societal organizations as consequence of the confluence of globalization and technological advances that alter the nature of conflict and crime, agile groups, and fuel the privatization of violence."<sup>7</sup>

### Background

What are gangs? There are many definitions of these groups; however, the most appropriate, that fits the 21st century and its circumstances, comes from the scholars Gardener and Knox. Gardner includes territory and delinquency in his definition of a gang describing it as "an organization of young people ..., which has a group name, claims a territory or neighborhood as its own, meets with its members on a regular basis, and has recognizable leadership. The key element ...is delinquency: its members... violate the law."<sup>8</sup>

George Knox considers a group as a gang when "it exists for or benefits substantially from the continuing criminal activity of its members. Some elements of crime must exist... there could also be crimes of violence."<sup>9</sup> In his definition he identifies

major variables such as leadership, violence, crime, identifiable territory, organization, specific purpose and participation in some type of illegal activity.

Where do these violent groups come from? The Mara Salvatrucha “MS-13” first appeared in Honduras in 1989 and the Street 18 “Mara 18” surfaced in the 1990’s. “Both gangs have a strong presence throughout northern Central America and the southern of Mexico, and they enjoy working relationships with various Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers.”<sup>10</sup> Both, MS-13 and Mara 18 emerged as a result of migration effects and the remaining rebel groups from violent guerrillas who fought in Guatemala’s, Nicaragua’s, and El Salvador’s civil war. These groups emerged in Honduras in two ways.

The primary reason why these groups came into Honduras was as a consequence of migration into the United States of America (U.S.) and later retracing their steps back into their own homeland.<sup>11</sup> It is well known that the gangs began early in the twentieth century 1910-1925;<sup>12</sup> but there was also another migration wave of people from Central America (C.A.) These people were escaping the internal conflict of war and violence in the 1980’s. In both cases, immigrants came into the U.S. with the ideal of a better life, hope, safety and security, but often it was thwarted because there were not enough opportunities to fit into a new society either as a result of culture, language barrier or values. In plain terms, they were not able to a new society.<sup>13</sup> So, these “marginalized young immigrants, already skilled in the use of weapons, machetes, and combat tactics due their violent background,”<sup>14</sup> coalesced into a group that subsequently became known as the two dangerous Latino gangs— “Mara 18” [Street 18] and “MS-13” (Mara Salvatrucha), a particularly Hispanic violent group with ties to

C.A.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that these violent groups originally sought to protect immigrants in the United States of America from the ruthlessness of a new unknown environment, eventually they began to chase upon their own local community.<sup>16</sup>

Another factor in the rise of these gangs in Honduras is the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) deportation of these youths, beginning in 1992. In July 2004, 20,000 youths, and in 2011, 44,000 youths were deported to Central America. These deportees who returned to Honduras were instrumental in the proliferation of the two gangs, MS-13 and Street 18. The assimilation of tactics, ideology of violence and procedures took place by members of smaller gangs, primarily from the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, began to imitate the two main rival gangs, adopting the hand signs, clothing, and language that had originated on the streets of Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup>

A secondary reason for the violent groups entering Honduras was the incomplete transition of the Central America fighters during the Cold War conflicts. After the peace accords in the region, the governments were never able to reintegrate the ex-combatants into society either in the short term or long term. As a result, they became part of a new group of unemployed and illiterate persons who in most cases were full of hatred toward a society that had been unable to offer better opportunities in a post-conflict environment. In the meantime there was already a large youth population (age 12-29, 30% from 8 million)<sup>18</sup> that was considered a social risk which provided a ready pool of gang recruits. All these conditions established that violence has been rising in the country, when teenager gangs tagged themselves as 'maras,' which is a shortened nickname of 'marabunta,' (large South American 'killer ants' that destroy everything in

their path) began to appear, sooner or later gave “Honduras a level of violent deaths comparable to that found in nations at war.”<sup>19</sup>

### Gangs as Non - State Actor

While “insurgents” appear in Iraq, “terrorists” wreak havoc in the Philippines, states occupy territories, and armies of “war lords” cause destruction in other places of the world,<sup>20</sup> the Honduran government and its homeland security agencies struggle with youth gang groups who likely are becoming “non-state actors of a new urban insurgency.”<sup>21</sup> Many of these gangs are growing and imposing an ideology of violence that works together with the Transnational Crime Organization (TCO),<sup>22</sup> posing a threat to domestic and national security.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Central American countries, in particular Honduras, are susceptible to violent crime, fueled by drug trafficking and corruption because they are geographically trapped between the world’s largest drug-producing and drug-consuming countries.<sup>23</sup> As a comparison, nowadays the murder rate in Latin American countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras is 10 times more than other average worldwide.<sup>24</sup> Other related crimes like abduction increased at an alarming rate over 300% in the last decade. To make matters worse a high rate of violent crimes as in Mexico as Honduras goes unsolved.<sup>25</sup>

Another main factor that explains the extent and intensity of the killing from Honduras and other Central American countries is the cartels’ use of the criminal MS-13 and M-18 gangs. Emerging gangs of young people receive funds, drugs and weapons from “the Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO) which use gangs for their dirty work. Historically, C. A. has been known for its infestation of gang organizations that now

provide abundant muscle to the cartels.”<sup>26</sup> In Honduras as in other countries, “DTO are now also using children between 12 and 15 years of age.”<sup>27</sup> This is a new model of youth worker on the cartels, because they are less suspicious to the security law enforcement officials and they easily turn on dependent and part of the network of the drug business.

Publicly existing statistics indicate that there are some 80,000 gang members operating in C.A. However, this number may, in reality, be as great as 200,000, whereas the “UNODC provides a range that goes up to as many as 500,000” gang members.<sup>28</sup> Yet, “a lower estimate of affiliated gangs suggests that the numbers of gang members could rival the military forces of most C.A. countries: Nicaragua and Honduras have armies of about 12,000 soldiers each, El Salvador about 13,000 soldiers, and Guatemala 27,000.”<sup>29</sup> The distribution of violence within the above countries varies greatly, even if the overwhelming majority of gang violence can definitely be said to occur in urban areas, particularly in capital city regions. According to recent data from the Honduras National Statistic Institute (INE), 57.3% of the Honduran urban population is under 25 years of age. Compounding this youth vulnerability is the fact that only 74.4% of urban youth between 10 and 18 years go to school; 9.3% work; 6.3% study and work; 10.3% neither work nor study.<sup>30</sup> Dennis Rogers and Robert Muggah state “this is not entirely surprising; gangs are very much urban manifestations since a critical demographic mass of youth is inevitably necessary for a gang to emerge.”<sup>31</sup>

For other scholars who also argue that gangs are different from organized crime because they normally lack hierarchical leadership organization, resources and

manpower to run sophisticated criminal organization or to infiltrate state institutions at different levels.<sup>32</sup>

However, we have seen so far that these groups in Honduras as others C.A. countries are evolving as “third generation gangs residing at the intersection between crime and war,”<sup>33</sup> because in many cases they use a political agenda to “aim their ends and undermine governments, in addition to their internationalization”<sup>34</sup> and their range. These groups operate from the U.S. to C.A. under a very sophisticated network. “Like insurgencies and other conventional asymmetric irregular wars, there is no simple or universal model upon which to base a response to the gang phenomenon.”<sup>35</sup> Because they operate among us, their battle space is amongst the civilian population, the people have become the main target. Besides this, the gangs rely on technology and a highly decentralized transnational criminal network, as well as having a “propensity for indiscriminate violence, intimidation [and] coercion [that] transcend[s] borders, and target[s] nation-states.”<sup>36</sup> If we add the fact that transnational street gangs are growing at an alarming rate and they are “becoming more violent and committing more crimes; ...dispersing...and infiltrating communities that have been immune to this violence in the past; and their organization appears to be increasingly more structured...”<sup>37</sup>

Honduras’ violence is similar to that of Mexico due to drug trafficking, which is linked to street gangs, people trafficking and corruption in the police, judiciary and political elites. In some parts of the country, “drug cartels act as de facto authority and there is evidence of a training camp for assassins.”<sup>38</sup> As a quick response to the security challenge presented by the gangs, the Honduran Congress has rushed through legislation to deploy the military to support the police for at least six months. But, it

seems the Honduran government has forgotten that there is always a link between the political ends and military means. One might even consider “insurgency as primarily a military activity and one may think of gangs as a simple law-enforcement problem. Yet, insurgents and third generation gangs are engaged in a highly complex political act – political war.”<sup>39</sup> In General Rupert Smith’s words, the confrontations and conflicts have to be understood as intertwined political and military actions. “It is no longer practical to politicians...to expect the military to solve the problem by force, nor is it practical for the military to plan and execute a purely military campaign.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, considering that the utility of force alone is no longer useful in current conflicts, it is better to use force to set the conditions for resolving conflicts by other means.<sup>41</sup>

Dr. Max Manwaring assesses that the gangs have evolved, and that “they are becoming more autonomous, less well understood, and more unpredictable than their parent organization.”<sup>42</sup> Like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self Defense Groups of Colombia (AUC), the street gangs of Honduras have similar patterns in violence and activities, despite the stated political aims of Colombia’s armed groups. For instance, the MS-13 has become a more independent network criminal gang operating actively.<sup>43</sup> Also it uses dirty operations “conducted by hired guns from among aspirants or sympathizers as part of their tactics based upon terror, fear, and other barbaric methods (mutilation, kidnapping, murder, rape, pillage).”<sup>44</sup> The ability of these “pandillas” to develop a tailored network and to interact with violent extremist groups is a major concern for the Honduran government and U.S. security cooperation, since criminal networks can be used by terrorist groups in order to operate on American soil.



The connection of crime and terrorism is characterized by expanding interdependence of terrorist and transnational criminals and gangs<sup>45</sup>, despite the potential difference of their agendas (politic ends versus profit). The MS-13, Street 18 gangs and TCO with potential interests in politic and profit can take advantage of the benefits of mutual partnership.<sup>46</sup> There have even been some links between gangs and terrorist groups. For instance, in June of 2004, according to Tina S. Strickland, the Colombian police indicated that the FARC and other drug cartels had ties to MS-13 cliques in El Salvador. On the other hand, in September 2004, The Washington Times reported an “Al Qaeda/MS-13 connection in Honduras in which a key Al Qaeda cell leader, Adnan G. El Shukrijumah, was supposed to have met with MS-13 leaders. Subsequent sources stated that this meeting was never verified by authorities in Honduras.”<sup>47</sup> It is a clear example of the threats posed by gangs, with the potential for gangs and terrorist groups to join forces being the most disturbing. Within such supposed theory, extremist violent groups could use and control the “extensive smuggling networks run by gangs to move weapons, money and operatives for terrorist groups.”<sup>48</sup>

Mauricio Gabori, the director of the Postgraduate Department of the University of Central America of El Salvador (UCA) assessed, in 2004, that 3123 Hondurans were killed by firearms, a murder rate exceed by countries , where internal conflicts has been fought for long term such as Colombia in its counterinsurgent and Narco-trafficking war.<sup>49</sup> This violence is still on the rise. Honduras currently exhibits some of the highest rates of reported homicide and criminal victimization in Latin America and, indeed, in the world. The United Nations reported, in 2010, that Honduras had the world’s highest

murder rate. This rate continues to increase with “82 killings per 100,000 inhabitants—an average of 20 murders a day,”<sup>50</sup> so the Honduran government needs to set out more active strategic policies to coerce these non-state actors. Much of the killing is related or linked to drug-trafficking or other TCO.

The figures above represent a high scale of violence. Honduras people are living in constant fear, said Blanca Alvarez, whose son was murdered by gangs during a carjacking in 2006.<sup>51</sup> Gang warfare represents a challenge to Honduran stability, uncovering “underlying weaknesses in governability and law and order.”<sup>52</sup>

### Challenging the Democratic System

The Honduran Constitution states: “The human person is the supreme end of society and the State. Everyone has the obligation to respect and protect other citizens. The human dignity is inviolable.”<sup>53</sup> But this is not the philosophy of violent youth gangs (pandillas) that challenge the state’s authority through the use of force to compel it. Thousands of young people belong to these trans-nationally linked groups, which control most of the poorest neighborhoods of Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma and other big cities. Large parts of Honduras’ poor urban population are subject to youth gang violence rather than to the state’s rule.

Dr. Max Manwaring ascertains “a government’s failure to extend a legitimate sovereign presence throughout its national territory leaves a vacuum in which gangs, drug cartels, leftist insurgents, the political and Narco right, and the government itself may all compete for power.”<sup>54</sup> These current circumstances characterize Honduras’ government, which seems every day to weaken and seems to have lost the ability to provide basic individual rights to its citizens. Honduras appears to be uncontrollably confronted by the five operational levels of national security challenges described by

Bruneau.<sup>55</sup> The first level is “straining government capacity”<sup>56</sup> by overwhelming police and legal system through sheer audacity, violence, and numbers. This level can be seen in the Honduran 2011 murder rate which is attributed to the dispute of main street gangs for controlling territories, drug network distribution control and smuggling.

They [Gangs] “challenge the legitimacy of the state,”<sup>57</sup> particularly in regions where the culture of democracy are defied by corruption and reinforced by the inability of political systems to function well enough to provide public goods and services; therefore, they instate the gangs as alternate “governments.” These “governments” dominate the informal economic sector; they establish small businesses and use violence and coercion, and co-optation of government authorities. In Honduras, gangs supplement their drug trafficking revenue with “business taxes and extortion.” They infiltrate police and nongovernmental organizations to further their goals and in doing so demonstrate latent political aims.

The “state's administrative structure”<sup>58</sup> should cover the entire country of Honduras, but, in many areas throughout the country, “there is an absence or only partial presence of state institutions.”<sup>59</sup> San Pedro Sula has been declared the most dangerous city in the world.<sup>60</sup> Honduras’ grim tally reached 6,239 killings in 2010.<sup>61</sup> Lawless urban territories create opportunities for “gangs to challenge ... national security, stability, and sovereignty and attempt to neutralize, control, or depose governments.”<sup>62</sup> As a result the state of Honduras fails and gives the appearance of a new socio political structure built on criminal values, which are far from the democratic values that are meant to be the country’s foundation.

A weakened rule of law enforcement is the result of the loss of accountability from the official authorities, who most of the time are involved in acts of dishonesty provides the paved road for making them more vulnerable to corruption and coercion. The Honduran judicial system seems to be useless when crimes directed by drug traffickers or gang members are committed in public and no one opposes them for fear of reprisal. The people consider forsaken by law enforcement agencies in this conflict.<sup>63</sup>

External actors reflect the weak position of the judiciary in the political system as a whole because of its inefficiency and the manipulation of its jurisdiction. The position of judges is not sufficiently professionalized, and the efforts to ensure accountability have so far been fruitless.<sup>64</sup> Most Hondurans have only limited access to the courts, and this remains one of the most striking deficiencies in the effort to strengthen the democratic system.<sup>65</sup> Hondurans often lack the economic and educational resources necessary to claim their rights in long and costly lawsuits, which are often carried out by judges, who are subject to corruption and political influences;<sup>66</sup> consequently, the majority of the citizens are systematically excluded from due process, enforcing the perception already established of a lack of the rule of law.

Civil liberties are constrained by this limited access to due process. Many victims of abuses by gang members have not yet seen the condemnation of their perpetrators by the courts, and also human rights activists still face death threats and enjoy little government support.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the state seems to be unable, and in some cases, unwilling to protect and provide security to the citizens' civil and human rights. Many of street children and presumed "gangs" members are killed every year by death squads, yet this only increases violent and retaliation between groups and against the society.

An example of this violent reprisal occurred in 2003, prison personnel killed 69 inmates because of an alleged revolt, and in May, 2004, over 100 prisoners – again all of them youth gang members – died in a prison fire. In February 2012, 359 more prisoners died in prison fires, most of them who were affiliated to the main gangs groups.<sup>68</sup>

Corruption in the political and bureaucratic system is still common practice in Honduras, and general public believe that this is one of the most urgent problems to solve, endangering good governability. During the period of 2011, Honduras did not improve its poor ratings of 2.6 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, although it still ranks 129 of 182 nations.<sup>69</sup> Efforts made by the state and the parliament to impeach corrupt governmental officials and get rid of impunity are quite not enough, such as the elimination of parliamentary immunity in 2004, are largely seen by Honduran's analysts as an "image campaign by the political elite, to help them regain credibility"<sup>70</sup> in the eyes of the electorate and foreign donors [international community]. Overall, anti-corruption actions have proven being so unsuccessful, mainly due to the judicial system's inefficiency and lack of check in balance among the three state powers.<sup>71</sup> This applies not only to the courts, but also to state prosecution authorities.

The corruption instated in some governmental institutions also severely undermines the confidence of the population. Journalist broadcast in daily observation how the law enforcement officials often clear roadblocks, supply weaponry and, at times, give armed escorts to drug shipments. When DTO members are arrested, government officials often ensure favorable jail conditions or a quick release because the prosecutors sabotage the case or the police contaminate the crime scene.<sup>72</sup> Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have penetrated "portions of the police, treasury, customs,

military, interior ministry, attorney general's offices, jails and court systems throughout Central America." They frequently fund public works, political campaigns, and sponsor lawyers in their studies and their law practices.<sup>73</sup> In several rural areas, the cartels overcome the government in sustain of the community.

Due to the evolving relationship between Mexican drug-trafficking organizations and Central American gangs, in June 2008, the United States Congress increased country and regional anti-gang assistances by approving initial funding for the Mérida Initiative and later for the CARSI program, an anti-crime and counterdrug foreign aid package of \$300 million for Mexico and Central America.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, the motivation of international aid is not enough to encourage central and local governments to fight and make extensive efforts to gangs and Narco-groups. This is due to the fact that these non-state actors have the capability to pay the police members up to \$5,000 monthly in order to get their cooperation with the cartels and to support them with weapons and hand grenades strictly used by the military forces.<sup>75</sup>

### Challenging the State

For some western developed countries, U.S. and Europeans, "transnational street gangs have social and economic impacts that might be considered small in comparison to the threats imposed by other terrorist groups and TCO."<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, in Honduras the impact is obviously different. The MS-13 finds favorable conditions in Honduras for continued growth of their illegal enterprise, the results of which are more than evident when viewing the social, economic, and national security impact. Indeed, the central government has expended considerable resources to combat them. These resources might have been better used in human development and human security, considering the fact that Honduras's index for human development is 1162, along with

80% poverty that make it one of the most undeveloped countries in the America continents.<sup>77</sup> It is becoming a significant issue that requires political and social attention from the government and will need adequate funds for complementary programs for deterrence and prevention.<sup>78</sup> “It is clear the country needs help”, said U.S. Ambassador Lisa Kubiske.<sup>79</sup>

As a result of the lack of adequate strategic policies dealing with transnational gangs and related activities, Honduras has lost humanitarian support. In 2011, the U.S. decided not to renew \$215 million for the Millennium Corporation Challenge (MCC) aid program for Honduras due to the failure of governmental management to comply with the reduction of corruption and crime levels. The U.S. considered that the Honduras Government had failed to improve human rights, freedom of speech, economics, fiscal policies and security.<sup>80</sup> Recently, the U.S. Peace Corps made the decision to suspend operations in Honduras because of safety concerns.<sup>81</sup>

To make matters worse, Honduran citizens have become afraid to spend time in their communities and have provided less patronage to local businesses and community organizations. In addition, the extortion of a “gang tax” from some local businesses can also have a significant impact on their ability to make a profit and continue to operate within the community.<sup>82</sup> According to Strickland, “eventually ... smaller businesses may decide the sacrifices and hardships to keep their businesses within the territory of an MS-13 clique [gang cells] are just not worth the price to them emotionally and economically.”<sup>83</sup> In some parts of the main cities the “urban jungles” of Honduras, as Major Gustavo Alvarez states, the populace is required to pay a “toll” for even riding a bus, managing a business or for entering a neighborhood controlled by a gang<sup>84</sup>, these

practice has become part of the Honduran daily live hood. “In 2011 gangs had revenues for \$50 million per year in ‘gang tax’.”<sup>85</sup> Investors do not put their money where the rule of law is not absolute.

The current Honduras President Porfirio Lobo, in 2011, vowed to do everything possible within the law to reduce the impunity of crime. As part of his strategy to put criminal gangs at bay, he has directed hundreds of troops (armed forces) to be deployed in the main cities to combat a wave of criminal violence.<sup>86</sup> Dr. Manwaring argues that “non-state conflicts are too complex to resolve them by the use of force as a strictly military solution to a given national security problem.”<sup>87</sup> The state should develop strategies and policies that allow the clear articulation of the corresponding ways and means.<sup>88</sup> Once again the author, Dr. Max Manwaring states “it is too complicated to allow a strictly police solution to a law enforcement problem.”<sup>89</sup> But, the trend in Central America countries is that employment military forces give support to law enforcement agencies to minimize the effect of criminal activities without defining others strategic lines of effort such as governance, rule of law or economic and social development.

Honduras’ Congress passed legislation in 2003 to enact a penal code amendment that established a maximum 12-year prison sentence for gang memberships as part of the “mano dura” strategy policy.<sup>90</sup> This penalty was then raised to 30 years in prison in December 2004. But the violence has become more political. Gangs in late December 2004 machine-gunned a bus, killing more than 20 people. The gunmen left a banner justifying the killings as a protest against anti-gangs policies. Honduras is experiencing a resurgence of the gang phenomenon because cartels are providing them with money and weapons, which have also corrupted the law



enforcement agents. Many murders were directed by drug cartels but executed in many cases by gang members as associates of this partnership. In December 2009, — Honduras' drug czar, retired General Julian Aristides Gonzalez was assassinated. Gonzalez denounced police agents' involvement in trafficking activities and leading gang structures for months prior to his assassination. On February 21-25, 2010, Honduran police intelligence accused the mayor of El Paraiso, a small town in Copan, Alexander Ardon of working with the Sinaloa Cartel. Ardon had built a town hall that resembled the White House, with a heliport on the roof, and he moved freely with his own armed escort of 40 private army members.<sup>91</sup> Besides, Ardon is suspected of providing security to the billionaire Mexican drug cartel Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, hiring gangs from MS-13 or army veterans to protect him, when he comes to Honduras.

In October 2011, a drug plane was "stolen" by presumed drug traffickers from inside an air force base in Honduras. No high rank officers were arrested and the trial continues with unknown results. Penetration into the police has been evident in Honduras when ten members of the elite antinarcotics Operation Group were arrested for transporting 142 kilos of cocaine in the Mosquito region of Honduras.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, "High-ranking Officials and their ties to the disappearance of 300 FAL weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition took place on November 4, 2011."<sup>93</sup> The individuals in charge of operations were identified as Oscar Alvarez (elected congressman) Minister of Interior and Jose M. Licona, Police National Commissioner, both of whom have denied responsibility in the disappearance of the items mentioned above. "It is thought that the missing weapons and ammunition have been sold to gangs or drug trafficking organizations."<sup>94</sup> A month later, the Secretary of National Security had been fired by the

Honduran President, Porfirio Lobo, after he initiated a campaign to eliminate corrupt members from the police core.

Currently in Honduras, as the previous examples illustrate, the lack of rule of law pervades all levels and branches of government. The Honduran people is afraid of reporting from crime abuse, for instance, in recently polls made by Vanderbilt's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) an average of 41 percent from those interviewed did not report a crime because they feared reprisals.<sup>95</sup>

Transnational organization gangs are challenging the state of Honduras. They have infiltrated and undermined the state's organization along with the authority of law enforcement and the majority of the cases are cooperating and colluding with state structures. Honduras gives the sense of being a weak state to the international community, suffering from deficits in legitimacy governance, authority, capacity, provision of public and basic goods and inclusiveness.

### Conclusion

The phenomenon of gangs is complex, multifaceted, and constantly evolving. Although gangs have always been in existence, gangs today are more violent, more organized, and more widespread. The problems associated with stemming the spread and sophistication of MS-13 and M-18 gang activities in Honduras reflect the limitations in approach to a situation considered a multinational and regional problem.

The third generation gangs must be taken seriously since they are a new form of insurgency that works in tandem with the TCO, posing a threat to the Honduran government security, national and regional stability. Their tactics, their motivation, techniques, and procedures may differ from that of the insurgent groups or extremist

violent actors motivated by a political or religious ideology, but the results are frequently the same. Both attack the sovereignty of the nation-state and erode the fragile democracies, democratic values, respect for human rights, and territorial security [sovereignty].

The environment created by these groups provide a sense of a weak or failing state that promotes the expansion of gang activity as the legitimate government grows weaker and loses control over Honduras' sovereign territory. These groups could ultimately be used and exploited by terrorist groups to link their network connections to further collective goals.

The Honduran government must recognize that third generation gangs pose a significant threat to national stability and state sovereignty. Therefore, the government should develop more comprehensive approaches to counter gang activities. To do so, the government must be willing, first, to commit the resources and political will necessary to implement long-term strategies; second, to require the involvement of governments working [interagency] in close collaboration with civil society, the private sector, local community sector and, finally, to pledge Honduras' support for international aid to implement a broader range of operation that includes interagency lines of efforts and implementation of clear national strategies.

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